



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 8
Issue 2 April 2004

Article 6

12-7-2016

Big Fish

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Recommended Citation

Brintnall, Kent L. (2016) "Big Fish," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/6>

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Big Fish

Abstract

This is a review of *Big Fish* (2003).

Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* was vilified by conservative Christians. Enraged by the depiction of Jesus as sexually active and psychologically disturbed, these critics usually overlooked one of the most provocative scenes in the film. Near the end of Scorsese's movie, Jesus encounters Paul teaching about his crucifixion, death and resurrection. Very alive, Jesus confronts Paul about his obvious lie. Paul rebuffs Jesus and proclaims that the truth of his preaching is beside the point; the story of Jesus' death and resurrection gives people hope and that is the only matter of importance. Tim Burton's most recent film, *Big Fish*, is organized around this thematic - the power of stories. His vision of how stories create, sustain and redeem people makes his film interesting for scholars of religion and sacred texts.

Burton's film tells the story of the Bloom family. Ed Bloom (Albert Finney), the patriarch, is dying and his son, Will (Billy Crudup), returns home to both support his mother (Jessica Lange) and to mend his relationship with his father. Throughout Will's life, Ed has told outrageous and fantastic stories about his experiences growing up; Will wants to take this time to learn the truth about his father's life.

Burton deftly handles both halves of the film. The performances from Finney, Lange and Crudup in the family melodrama of the "real world" are believable, moving and nuanced. Finney and Crudup's interactions gesture to the

alienation of the male self and the difficulty of father-son relationships. The scene between Finney and Lange in the bathtub tells the story of a wonderful marriage in the economic terms available to the film medium.

In depicting Ed Bloom's story world, Burton's imaginative hand is given free range to play. Ewan McGregor plays the young Ed with a well-scrubbed earnestness that is utterly captivating. Helena Bonham Carter plays a dual role of a witch and a forelorn lover. The visual charm of the story world and the turns of its plot are enchanting; the lightness of this world adds to the emotional pull of the other half of the film.

As the film progresses, the viewer is drawn more fully into Ed's stories, but Will is shown as increasingly angry and frustrated by his father's unwillingness to engage in a meaningful conversation about his life. In the final scenes of the film, however, as Ed dies, he insists that his story does not end this way - in a hospital bed - and demands that Will tell him how he dies. In a final gesture of love and comprehension, after a lifetime of despising his father's stories and his father as story-teller, Will finishes the story his father has begun, pulling together the themes, images and characters of his father's storied life to blend reality and fantasy in act of communion and care. By unselfishly releasing the anger he has held about his father's stories, Will gains the understanding that all we are is our stories and that his father's stories gave him a reality and substance and a dimension that was as

real, genuine, and deep as the day-to-day experiences that Will sought out. Will comes to understand, then, that his father - and the rest of us - are our stories and that the deeper reality of our lives may, in fact, not be our truest self.

When Will expresses his frustration with his father's stories to his father's doctor (Robert Guillaume), his father's doctor states, much like Paul in *Last Temptation*, that his father's stories were always better than real life, always nicer, always more interesting--why wouldn't you prefer such a world?

As a director who has specialized in fantastic, imaginative adult parables, Burton is the perfect person to make a film about the power of stories. As scholars of religion who study the lives and habits of communities who organize themselves around powerful stories, we would do well to attend to the details and dynamics of *Big Fish*.